

THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

ASSOCIATE ALUMNI

OF THE

Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church

OF THE

DIOCESE OF VIRGINIA,

JUNE 21, 1871,

BY

GEORGE H. NORTON, D. D.,

RECTOR OF ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, ALEXANDRIA, VA.

PUBLISHED BY THE ALUMNI.

WASHINGTON:

M'GILL & WITHEROW, PRINTERS AND STEREOTYPERS.

1871.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2018 with funding from

This project is made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Office of Commonwealth Libraries

DISCOURSE.

"If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." I Pet., iv, 11.

"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." II Tim., ii, 15.

One chief duty, of a Christian minister, must always be the explanation of the Holy Scriptures. To perform this duty aright requires, on his part, an acquaintance with the Bible. He must study before he can teach. And if one is to study the Bible to purpose, he must have the light of intelligible and practical principles of Interpretation. It cannot, therefore, be considered inappropriate, called on as I am this morning to address an audience composed of the clergy, that I should ask your attention to the Interpretation of the Bible.

It might seem, at first sight, a gratuitous assumption, that anything need be said on such a subject, at this late day. It might fairly be presumed, some may urge, that clergymen are familiar with such a subject. Interpretation of Scripture is one of the branches of a Seminary course, and the Alumni have doubtless given proper attention to it.

Now, it is partly because of this view, which would lead the alumnus to be satisfied with what he has been taught of the Science of Interpretation, and which

sometimes, it is feared, tempts him to leave behind him what he has learned, not sufficiently regarding its practical bearing upon the most awful responsibilities of his Sacred Office, that I am led to ask your attention, this morning, to some thoughts upon the topic.

It would be arrogance, indeed, to attempt *instruction*, where I might so much more profitably sit at the feet of many who favor me by their presence. But as one who feels deeply the grave position we occupy, when we stand up, in our several congregations, to explain the Bible to the people ; when I remember the confidence with which many lean upon our guidance, and the indifference and hostility of many more towards the saving truths of Christianity ; when I look around upon the progress men are making in knowledge, and observe with anxiety that increase of general knowledge does not by any means insure attention to the public ministrations of the sanctuary ; it is with profound earnestness I must ask you to think with me, this morning, whether we are doing all that in us lies to show ourselves approved unto God, by rightly dividing the word of truth, speaking, when we do speak, with the light of God's oracles. To be wise teachers, we must be patient students. If our people are to be nourished with the waters of life, we must take heed how we draw from the Wells of Salvation.

Upon what principles the Bible should be inter-

preted, so far from being a question of the past, is, in my judgment, *a living question* of the day. Never before did it lie so near the hearts of the most civilized races of men. It was never so much and so openly discussed. It never called forth such powerful intellectual energies. It never enlisted, upon opposing sides, such gigantic learning. It permeates philosophies, colors scientific essays, tinges light literature, and associates itself with upheavals of the social fabric.

It can hardly escape the least watchful eye that, amid all the engrossing cares with which the men of our time are building up a material prosperity, there has been an earnest band of scholars seeking a proximate perfection of the Sacred TEXT. In view of late discoveries of manuscripts that proximate perfection, in the New Testament text, seems likely soon to be reached. And as each new advance is made towards the completion of this great and needful work, results are accepted by the great mass of the educated, whether believers or skeptics. The textual questions connected with the Old Testament may not promise so early a solution, but they are confessedly of less consequence, though of greater difficulty, than those of the New. The book, as a whole, is a fact which the world must accept. Its veritable words the world of scholars seems resolved to ascertain. There is every reason to hope that the text of the entire book will be, at no distant day, determined upon princi-

ples to which the learned of all creeds will assent. And the sole interest which attaches to this textual question is that which multitudes, either consciously or unconsciously, recognize as *the* question of the day. We have the book. We shall soon have it in its textual integrity. Now, what does it mean?

To explain its meaning is our appointed office, beloved brethren. And if we are to acquit ourselves as able ministers of the New Testament, in an age which is intelligent, inquisitive, and active, we must strive, by all the powers of nature, and all the auxiliaries of grace, to find that key which unlocks the treasury of Revelation.

Of individual prerequisites for the interpretation of Scripture, at least common sense, the fullest training to be gained in our schools and colleges, and, above all, a converted soul, must be counted indispensable. In defense of the two first named nothing need be said. Of the last, I think no one can doubt, who has witnessed the miserable failures which have resulted from all attempts to grasp the truths of the Bible, without it.

With this preparation of mind and heart, the student takes in hand that book, which is the lamp of life, and inquires its meaning.

That meaning, as all now consent, must be sought in the Grammatical and Historical sense, viewed in the light of the Context, the *usus loquendi* of the writer, the Analogy of Scripture, and, as all agree in

fact, though they may differ in terms, in the light of true Philosophy and Science.

The most widely divergent parties all bind themselves to stand or fall by the conditions specified, save the last; and no party, and, it would seem, no intelligent man, would plead for an interpretation of a revelation in Words which should conflict with the revelation stamped on man's Spirit and unfolded in the works of Creation. The vain-glorious boastings of science, falsely so-called, and the timidity, natural, but not praiseworthy, of divines, has produced jealousy of any mention of this fundamental condition of Biblical interpretation; but the apologetic, shifting, and, must I say it? not always candid appearance, which this jealousy gives to Scripture exposition, should teach us not to be more careful for the Ark than God himself has been. We shall be driven at last to the conviction, and not be afraid to avow it, with all its consequences, that Truth is one, and can never be out of harmony with itself. It is not, indeed, to be expected of the Interpreter of Scripture that he should prosecute all departments of science, and explore the mysteries of philosophy. It would be most inexpedient to attach himself to mere theories and speculations. But he must have his eye upon demonstrated results, and show that he can discriminate between fact and fancy.

To express myself more specifically, let me say, that a revelation from God to Man implies a knowl-

edge of God, the maker of all things, and of Man, the creature of God's hand, and an inhabitant of Earth. This knowledge is called Philosophy, physical and metaphysical. Every man who expects to read the records of Revelation intelligently must have a Philosophy, of some kind; and the expounder of Revelation, who expects to teach others, must have a Philosophy which he can justify when brought in contact with the best intellect of the age in which he lives. If his Metaphysics be undefined and shadowy, his Biblical interpretations, upon the most essential doctrines, will be vague and indefinite. If his acquaintance with Physics be not considerable, he must not expect a patient hearing upon those points where Scripture and Science meet.

Not to linger upon this topic, however, let us reflect upon the immense gain which has come to Biblical Interpretation from the universal agreement of scholars upon the need of keeping close to the grammatical, contextual, historical sense of Scripture. It requires not that we should go back to the early centuries of the Church, and read the strange, though well intended, comments of patristic writers, to make us feel the great advance which has been made, in this respect. The history of exegesis proves, indeed, that the true lights of Biblical science have in no age failed; that, amid all vagaries, there has been kept a golden thread of common sense; and that the principles now agreed on by all, have always been respected

by some. But there are those yet living who can testify to the happy change which has come over Biblical studies, in a generation or two. I cannot express my own sense of the grateful offerings made to Biblical learning, by men of the nineteenth century. The work has not always been wrought in the best temper, but it was none the less needful, and none the less valuable.

The laugh of Voltaire, at the uncertainties of Hebrew, would find no echo, even among his infidel successors, since Gesenius, with scornful lips, but from the instinct of truth, enounced those laws which give order and stability to our knowledge of the Hebrew records. In the New Testament—thanks to Winer and many others—we no longer wander amid anomalies, misplaced prepositions, and exchanged tenses; but, with firm tread, leaning on a syntax and etymology, which all Greek literature illustrates, we may take our place among the churches of Corinth, Galatia, and Rome, and listen to the letters of the great Apostle to the Gentiles, with full assurance of their meaning.

But let me say, beloved brethren, it is one thing to confound gainsayers with an enumeration of our improved apparatus for Biblical study, and quite another thing to use such apparatus as becomes men of our day, who assume to explain the Scriptures to our fellows. And there is, perhaps, especial need for us, as clergymen of the Episcopal Church, to remember

this distinction. To say nothing of the pleasure a clergyman's own soul will find, from what Archbishop Trench calls a "thoughtful meditation on the exact forces of words, which to those who receive them aright are words of eternal life," it must be confessed that he is little alive to his responsibilities as a Christian teacher, who contents himself with commentaries, while the Greek Testament is hid on the back shelf of his library, and the Hebrew Lexicon is stored in the attic.

A bishop of our Church was applied to, a few years ago, by a clergyman of the Church of England, to give him the names of all the commentaries on the Bible which had been published by American churchmen. The answer was not one we would like to proclaim from the house-top.

There are many facts in this connection I might refer to, but the theme is not agreeable, and I pass it by with a single question, which I beg those who hear me, to ponder well: In view of what we know of things in the Protestant Episcopal Church, is it not time to encourage, among our younger clergy, an enthusiasm for Biblical study?

It is time, however, to adduce some views which may justify the statement already made, that the question of Biblical Interpretation is a living question of the day. The subject presents itself in two forms:

1st. It is maintained by some expressly, and virtually adopted by a vast multitude of the highly edu-

cated, that "the Bible should be interpreted like any other book."

This affirmation is intended to carry along with it more than appears upon the surface. So far as it means to assert that the same historical, grammatical, and contextual considerations are to prevail, in ascertaining the sense of Scripture, as in other books, there is no controversy or difference of opinion among Biblical scholars. But it is intended to involve, and it is fairly owned, by those who urge it, that it does involve, a statement that the Bible is essentially *like* other books; a previous question, which cannot be so readily admitted, indeed which cannot be admitted at all, by those who claim more for Christian records than is conceded to the Vedas, the Zendavesta, Homer, and the Koran.

That the Bible differs from all these, in many important respects, no one denies. That it *so* differs as to require other methods for its right understanding than the application of those principles of interpretation which are needed for the comprehension of other books, brings before us a question, one of the two great practical questions of interest to the Church and the world, now demanding an answer.

We hold, then—I am sure I speak the sentiment of every one present—that the Bible not only differs, but so differs from all other books, that men may master all learning and science, and devote their energies to the study of the Bible, by the aid of gram-

mar, history, and philosophy, and yet not attain the truth of Scripture. Whatever resemblances may be found, and undoubtedly they are many, between the Bible and great works of genius, we claim for the Bible that it contains an authorized record of God's revelation to man, and that it is, therefore, not one of many similar phenomena of the strivings of the human spirit after divine truth, one phase of the consciousness of God in the history of the world, but the divinely-appointed, unique, and sufficient witness of God himself, given through chosen media, sanctioned by wonders divinely wrought, and sealed by the resurrection of God's only begotten Son. Any attempt to establish that this is a true view of the Bible would be, of course, out of place, on this occasion. I cite it only to say, that the admission of this view leads reflecting minds to understand why it is that the Bible can never be interpreted like any other book, with a hope of reaching its contents. Great progress may be made in clearing up difficulties, elucidating and illustrating the mere letter, by the diligent study of the Bible, as other books are studied; but all this is, in fact, but sweeping the porch of the Sanctuary. The secret of the Lord will remain still a secret to him, who has no other means of attaining the truth.

Something like this is confessed, by the more reasonable of those who claim that the Bible should be studied like any other book. The gifted Oxford pro-

fessor, (Professor Jowett, in *Essays and Reviews*,) who enounces this canon of interpretation as all sufficient, himself says, that "the interpretation of Scripture requires a vision and faculty divine, or, at least, a moral and religious interest not needed in the study of a Greek poet or philosopher."

This is a very moderate and altogether inadequate statement of the case. What is really required by the Biblical interpreter, and that, without which all his labors will be in vain, is a veritable gift of the Holy Ghost. I can gain no other view from the teachings of our Lord and his Apostles, than this: that the same Spirit which abode without measure with the Redeemer, must be the permanent endowment of him, who would learn the truth as it is in Jesus. This doctrine has been so exaggerated and corrupted by fanatics, we are in danger of neglecting its indispensable claims. To that neglect must be attributed, in large degree, the failure of many honest attempts to understand the Bible. We have need to be reminded, all of us who study the Bible, that spiritual things are spiritually discerned. It is only when the human powers are purified and elevated by the Holy Ghost, that man can even understand the Bible aright. However possible it may be that this need of ours and its supply may be resolved into higher laws of being—laws beyond our present capacity to conceive—it remains for the Christian student to seek, by continual prayer, that gift which God bestows so freely upon those who ask it.

If an illustration were demanded of the need and value of this spiritual principle in Biblical study, I would point to the later history of religious thought, in Germany. Everything which science and learning can achieve had been tried, there, upon the Bible, interpreting it "like any other book," and the result was empty Rationalism, Deism, Pantheism, and Atheism. The whole land seemed lost to Christianity. But amid all this confusion, bewilderment, and disbelief, there was a small company of men whose talents, acquirements, and honesty could not be despised, and who proclaimed that the blank results of criticism must not be received. The chief characteristic of these men was Spiritualism. It is instructive to mark their position at the first, when, struggling against the evil tide of skepticism, they scarcely felt able to refute the adverse arguments, upon grounds of mere scholarship, and yet they vigorously repelled the results of those arguments, in the power of the Spirit.

Their claim was, that the Bible could never be understood by mere reason and human learning, but by that Christian consciousness which is the light and life of God in the soul. This class of men have held their ground, have become numerous, and they now stand, with all the panoply of German philosophy and scholarship, battling for the truth. The final result has not been reached, but enough has come to pass to make us believe the day is surely coming, when, in

that land of free thought and wide erudition, the great essentials of Christianity will stand, not merely upon demands of spiritual yearning, but upon the firm pillars of advanced culture. It may not be, indeed, that the frame-work of verbal expression adopted by the German Reformers will remain precisely the same in the symbols of their descendants, but I do look for the full image of the Redeemer to be restored. I expect every one of those perfections of which criticism has despoiled him, to be brought back by a truer criticism, and that he will stand forth once more before the spiritualized intellect of Germany, in his entire human sympathy and divine power.

It is interesting to notice, also, that this mode of studying the Bible, in the light of the Spirit, tends to establish more firmly a conviction in the mind of the student, of the very fact, out of which comes the need of this method of study, viz, a conviction that the Bible *is* essentially unlike any other book.

If we begin our Biblical studies, by adopting any one of the various and conflicting definitions of inspiration which are set forth by wise Doctors of Theology, we may be preserved, indeed, from irreverent handling of the Word of Life; but we shall be in danger, too, of finding these definitions at war with the facts of Scripture. And hence will arise a temptation, either, to deal deceitfully with the record, or, to distrust its divine warrant.

On the contrary, the humble method of beginning

the study of the Bible, without attempting any formal theory of inspiration, will dispose the mind to receive, at their full value, the multitudinous tokens, which on every page, in the utterances of the human writers, attest the voice Divine.

And this humble, we might call it Baconian, if a greater than Bacon had not stamped it as the Christian, spirit of study, will always lead to a conviction of the Divine inspiration of Holy Writ; a conviction which, springing from the depths of the heart, and being in harmony with the highest development of the intellect, remains fixed and immovable.

2d. The other question of most concern to the Biblical interpreter, to which I am almost afraid, after delaying you so long, to ask your attention, and yet which I cannot pass by, is, Whether God has provided any aid for man, in those difficult cases, where the most faithful exertions of the individual mind, using all the means hitherto noticed, fail?

It is affirmed, by an authority* so high we should be glad, in all cases, to honor it, that "there are at least three large classes of passages in which they (the previous rules) fail in ascertaining for us the true mind of Scripture;" and it is claimed "these very failures force upon us additional rules, gradually more and more of a unique character, till we find ourselves frankly accepting the yet lacking general rule of scriptural interpretation." "These may be defined

* Ellicott, in *Aids to Faith*, p. 504.

roughly as (1) passages of *general* difficulty, where the context gives us no means of deciding between two or more competing translations, of equal correctness in point of logic and grammar ; (2) passages of *doctrinal* difficulty, where either the tenor of the declaration is doubtful, or where opposing deductions have been made as to the doctrine actually conveyed ; (3) passages of what may be termed *theological* difficulty ; *i. e.*, where the fact specified, or the principle referred to, involves mysterious relations between things human and divine, which are at best very imperfectly known to us."

Now, in these cases, which undoubtedly exist, where shall we look for help ? The answer given by the greatest Biblical scholar among living British Prelates is, that we must adhere to the "Analogy of faith," as found in the "Creeds, and especially the two shorter," as "compendious, but authoritative abstracts, summarily vouched for by the keeper of our archives and the upholder of their integrity, the Catholic Church of Christ." (Aids to Faith, p. 513.)

Such a sentiment, in a sermon, might pass without notice, but, in a formal essay upon Biblical interpretation, when we find this canon of the Catholic Church's authority to teach laid down as the final Canon of interpretation ; when we think of the wide-reaching influence of such a rule, if it be admitted at all ; moreover, when we remember what has come from it in the past, and what it has led to in the year

1870, at Rome, we may well pause, and consider, before adopting it. I cannot, of course, discuss the subject, but may remark that, when the long step is made, from a confession of individual incompetence to settle a multitude of scripture questions, by the aid of grammar, history, &c., from which no one will dissent, to the assertion that the Catholic Church of Christ is an authoritative interpreter of Scripture, it is obvious that a number of intermediate questions are passed over, more easily asked than answered, viz: When, where, and by whom was this authority conferred? What are the boundaries of the Catholic Church? What the rules under which her teaching function shall be exercised? Looking to all supposed cases of the exercise of this function in the past, it must also be settled by what warrant Bishops are understood to be the exclusive organs of the Church in teaching. When these questions are answered, as they usually are answered, by those who maintain this authority in the Church of Christ, it will still be hard to show that the Catholic Church has ever spoken, in the sense claimed, through any council or in any creed. And when these questions are answered, as reason and history would reply, it must be confessed the bewildered student of the Bible may well doubt whether the offer of such a guide to certainty, be either available or reliable.

These and many like considerations would lead us to decline the final and unique canon of interpreta-

tion offered by the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol. But, in so doing, let us recognize the germ of truth, in that proposed canon, which is worthy of great respect.

To the whole Church of Christ, including all her members, the Scriptures are intrusted. The duty of each member is, to study the Bible, according to his ability, and, therefore, the right to decide upon its meaning. But he can never safely exercise that right without regard to the multitude who are engaged, and from the beginning have been engaged, in the same studies. Christian humility forbids any other view. The decrees of so-called General Councils of the early centuries are entitled to all the consideration which the Church of England or our own Church has given them, as, the best attempts, perhaps, then practicable, when books were few and intercommunication difficult, to check individual and local idiosyncrasies by general and wider thought. Their decrees, being human, are subject to human review. The Church Catholic has never been assembled, so far as we know, even by fair representation, in one place. But in all lands, and in all branches of the Church, by night and by day, by means of laymen and clergy alike, who seek, by prayer, study, and spiritual aid, to penetrate the mysteries of revealed truth, that Church is continually revising all former decisions, and recording the judgment of each passing age.

To trace the progress of earnest study and devout thought, in the past, is one of the most interesting and instructive lines of investigation the Biblical student can pursue. It is gratifying, in such an investigation, to notice, that while, in lapse of time, there comes change of view, yet there remains, likewise, stability in Christian thought. So, we are glad to find that those old creeds, the so-called Apostle's and Nicene, are still adopted by the great mass of Christians, as by the Christians of primitive days, and upon the same ground which our VIIIth Article declares, "they ought to be received, because they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture."

To use the language of one, who I trust may long be spared to this Seminary and the Church,* "If we may no longer look for a so-called General Council, assembled in this city or that century," "we may look for something far better. Were the film removed from our eyes, as it was from the eyes of Elisha's servant, (when in peril in the beleaguered city he was given to see the mountains full of chariots and horsemen,) we should behold a General Council of wider composition, of deeper wisdom, of higher authority, of mightier power, of more illustrious presidency, sitting without adjournment, from the day when the Lord Jesus Christ ascended up to heaven to receive gifts for distribution among men, to the present hour of the Church's history."

* Rev. Dr. Sparrow's Convention Sermon, Richmond, 1853.

It may be very unsatisfying, to the impatient mind, to be left with no infallible guide in doubtful questions of Scripture interpretation. But the reflecting will find many compensating advantages for this inconvenience, and may well feel content that perfection of view, in Christian truth, is left to be gradually approached, as completeness of knowledge in all other departments is approached, under those laws which govern the development of the human mind.

That there is progress in men's knowledge of Christian truth, none can reasonably doubt; and that we each may have part in advancing that progress, is our great privilege. The Christian student, as well as, nay, more than, the philosopher, may say, I can hope for the future, by what I know of the past, and from what I see in the present.

“For, I doubt not, through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widened by the process of the suns.”

If, in conclusion, a personal reference may be allowed one who feels himself, this morning, in the midst of brethren, I would say, that when, years ago, I looked about for some place where best I might prepare for holy orders, my thoughts turned towards this blessed school of the prophets, influenced by one consideration. It seemed to me that, here, the Bible was put in its right place. Three years' experience proved this impression well founded. We were never allowed to forget that the great subject of study is the one Book. I have oftentimes since asked

myself, whether the sons of this Seminary, after entering the ministry, honored as they ought this great lesson, so carefully inculcated. That we are, all of us, influenced by it, in our preaching, I cannot doubt. But is there such careful study of the Bible as might be expected from us? I know that many excuses are offered by those who are engrossed in parochial labors; but I am convinced that, by rigid economy of time, we might all of us accomplish more than we do, in this respect. Even those who think country parishes an excuse, should remember that some of the greatest theological works of Great Britain were accomplished by country pastors. If the time saved from miscellaneous reading, and from that part of visiting which is mere gossiping, were appropriated to the critical study of God's Word, we should look back upon the days and hours so employed as the source of great strength and peace in our ministry. We should feel of them as Bishop Horne wrote of the time spent in composing his Commentary on the Psalms, when he says :

“The employment detached him from the bustle and hurry of life, the din of politics, and the noise of folly; vanity and vexation flew away for a season; care and disquietude came not near his dwelling. He arose fresh as the morning to his task; the silence of the night invited him to pursue it; and he can truly say that food and rest were not preferred before it. Every psalm improved infinitely upon his ac-

quaintance with it, and no one gave him uneasiness but the last, for then he grieved that his work was done. Happier hours than those which have been spent on these meditations on the Songs of Zion he never expects to spend in this world. Very pleasantly did they pass, and moved smoothly and swiftly along; for, when thus engaged, he counted no time. They are gone, but have left a relish and fragrance upon the mind, and the remembrance of them is sweet."

